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SUBJECT: MUSLIM OPPOSITION PARTY LEADER DISCUSSES
DEVELOPMENTS IN TAJIKISTAN

REF: A. (A) 08 DUSHANBE 870
[1](#)B. (B) 08 DUSHANBE 69

Classified By: Ambassador Tracey A. Jacobson for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Muhiddin Kabiri, the Chairman of the Islamic Revival Party, does not believe that Tajikistan will implement significant changes to the country's electoral legislation without significant pressure from the international community. He believes that the Government's misguided policy toward the Salafi movement risks increasing the Salafis' influence. Kabiri himself enjoys the increasing support of Tajiks dissatisfied with the current regime, but he does not appear to be ready to pose a serious challenge to the Government. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On July 21, PolOff spoke to Muhiddin Kabiri about recent political and religious developments. PolOff posed questions about the prospects for improved electoral laws, the Government's policy toward the Salafi movement, and his own party's increasing influence in the country.

Government Not Serious About Electoral Reform

[1](#)3. (C) Kabiri had been an active participant in the U.S. funded electoral law reform project implemented by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (reftel A). Kabiri thought that the Government of Tajikistan would make some cosmetic changes to voting procedures to placate the international community, but he did not expect significant changes as proposed by political party representatives in the context of the electoral law project.

[1](#)4. (C) Kabiri did think that the Government of Tajikistan would take the issue more seriously if the international community "presented a united front." He thought that more pressure from the United States and other like-minded governments would increase the chances of more substantial changes to the parliamentary and local election laws.

The Government Underestimates the Salafis

[1](#)5. (C) PolOff remarked that there is conflicting information about the Salafis in Tajikistan. Government officials have told EmbOffs that the Salafis are dangerous, and that the Government is doing what it can to prevent their influence. Some contacts have said that the "Salafi problem" has been ginned up by the Government to avoid scrutiny of its religious policy. Others have told EmbOffs that the Salafis have been able to influence mid-level (and possibly high level) Government officials.

¶6. (C) Kabiri said that the Government is playing a dangerous game with the Salafis. It uses them to enhance its position in the religious community: the Salafis have endorsed President Rahmon as a spiritual leader; they take away from the influence of the Islamic Revival Party; and they support the Government's legislative efforts to control religion, including the Law on Traditions. While some Government officials have expressed concerns about the Salafis in private meetings, public comments by Government officials are not commensurate with a comprehensive effort to limit their influence. He warned that the Government thinks it has the Salafis under its control "like the United States thought it had Osama bin Laden in its control."

¶7. (C) PolOff asked Kabiri about a rumor that the United States is actually financing the Salafis. Kabiri said the rumor was relatively widespread, but motivated by different kinds of speculation: the United States is friendly with Saudi Arabia, which finances the Salafis, so it would only be natural for the United States to support its ally's cause; the United States is funding the Salafis in Tajikistan, just like it does in Iran; financing the Salafis advances a U.S. goal of besmirching the image of Islam.

Islamic Party Gaining Members, But Now What?

¶8. (C) Kabiri claimed that 3,000 new members have joined the Party in the past year - the Party can now boast 25,000 members - and large crowds have greeted him in his travels throughout the country. Kabiri admitted that the Party does not have an economic plan that it can use to advocate for economic reforms; he said the lack of such a plan was one of

the reasons why the Party was muted in its criticism of the Government during the past winter's crisis. He said that criticism would not have improved the government's response during the crisis, and would not have helped those who were suffering during the winter.

¶9. (C) Kabiri commented that the Party is more unified than ever, and that it is well poised to exploit the disaffection amongst Tajikistan's youth caused by severe government mismanagement. The Party, however, would never be persuaded to join the current Government.

Ready For Prime Time?

¶10. (C) Comment: Embassy agrees with Kabiri's comments that the international community needs to make a serious effort to support the recommendations of political party representatives to reform Tajikistan's electoral laws. His comments that the Government underestimates the long term potential of the Salafis should cause concern; if he is correct that the Government's strategy is to co-opt this group, this effort may ultimately backfire.

¶11. (C) Comment continued: Kabiri's comments about the Islamist Party's unity relative to other parties points to the potential for his (and the IRPT's) increased political influence. However, he appeared to be disingenuous: Kabiri knows that the Party does not have an economic policy that would attract even more followers, yet he does not feel compelled to address that situation. His comment that it would have been imprudent to criticize the Government during the country's winter crisis flies in the face of conventional wisdom; it's not what we would expect from a political leader who seeks to exploit the governing party's every weakness. We wonder if he avoids such confrontation with the Government because of worries about his personal business interests and non-transparent party finances (reftel B). End comment.
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